

Stay Safe in the Heat (July 28, 2006)

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The summer months often encourage us to spend more time outside and take advantage of the many wonderful outdoor recreational activities available in Southwest Virginia. Summertime in our area is also accompanied by high temperatures and can be hazardous if not taken into account and appropriately planned for when heading outdoors. Whether hiking, going for a bike ride, taking a swim, or just relaxing in your yard it is important to keep in mind a few guidelines for avoiding any heat related illnesses or emergencies. As the recent heatwaves across the country have demonstrated high temperatures can be dangerous and in some cases deadly. The best way to avoid a heat related illness is prevention.

Listed below are guidelines developed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for preventing heat related illness.

- Dress for the heat. Wear lightweight, light-colored clothing. Light colors will reflect away some of the sun's energy. It is also a good idea to wear hats or to use an umbrella.
- Drink water. Carry water or juice with you and drink continuously even if you do not feel thirsty. Avoid alcohol and caffeine, which dehydrate the body.
- Eat small meals and eat more often. Avoid foods that are high in protein which increase metabolic heat.
- Slow down. Avoid strenuous activity. If you must do strenuous activity, do it during the coolest part of the day, which is usually in the morning between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m.
- Take regular breaks when engaged in physical activity on warm days. Take time out to find a cool place.

It is also important recognize the warning signs and symptoms for a heat related illness the two most common of which are heat exhaustion and heat stroke. According to the Red Cross heat exhaustion typically occurs when people exercise heavily or work in a warm, humid place where body fluids are lost through heavy sweating. Fluid loss causes blood flow to decrease in the vital organs, resulting in a form of shock. Signals include cool, moist, pale, flushed or red skin; heavy sweating; headache; nausea or vomiting; dizziness; and exhaustion. Body temperature will be near normal.

If someone is suffering from heat stroke bring that person to a cooler place and have him or her rest in a comfortable position. If the person is fully awake and alert, give a half glass of cool water every 15 minutes, and avoid liquids with alcohol or caffeine in them, as they can make conditions worse. Remove or loosen tight clothing and apply cool, wet cloths such as towels or wet sheets. Call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number if the person refuses water, vomits or loses consciousness.

Also known as sunstroke, heat stroke occurs when an individual's temperature control system, which produces sweating

to cool the body, stops working, and is life-threatening condition. The body temperature can rise so high that brain damage and death may result if the body is not cooled quickly. Signals include hot, red and dry skin; changes in consciousness; rapid, weak pulse; and rapid, shallow breathing.

Heat stroke is a life-threatening situation, and it is essential to notify emergency services personnel immediately by calling 9-1-1 or your local EMS number. In the interim individuals suffering from heat stroke should be moved to a cooler place, and steps should be taken to quickly cool the body. This includes wrapping wet sheets around the body, and if you have ice packs or cold packs or cold packs available, wrap them in a cloth and place them on each of the victim's wrists and ankles, in the armpits and on the neck to cool the large blood vessels.

As summertime continues into August it is important to remember the steps to avoid a heat related illness, as well as what to do if one in fact occurs. Doing so will help to ensure that you and your family stay safe in the heat.